TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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Lecture57

Lecture 57: Social Media and Tribes in India

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives. So today, we are going to first understand what social media is, and following that, we will understand the impact of social media, the influence of social media on tribal life in India. So, social media and tribes in India is our topic for today. Now, when we talk about social media, it refers to a category of online platforms and websites that are intentionally designed for empowering users to create and share their own content, to establish and cultivate relationships, and engage in various online communicative and interactive practices.
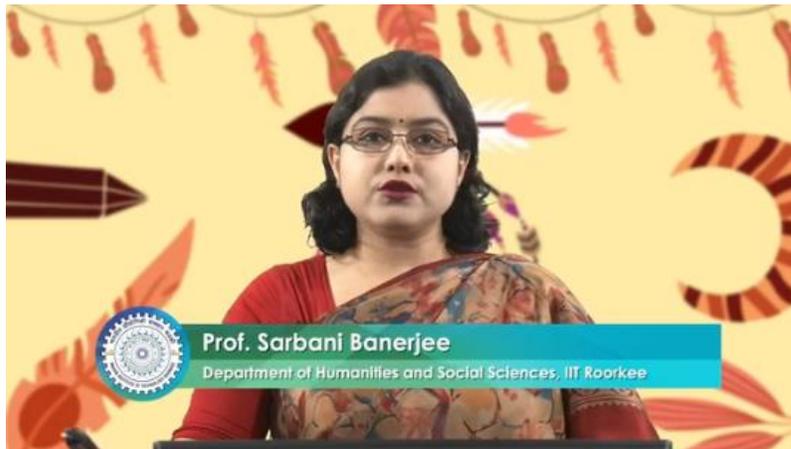
So it's a way of connecting people and also sharing one's personal information and personal opinions. Status. It's a way of showcasing one's talent, showcasing one's merit and qualifications, and what one has to offer in terms of jobs, in terms of one's professional profile, and so on. Social media actually boosts one's image or profile in the public domain according to one's own needs and desires.

So, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology in the Government of India defines social media as web or mobile platforms that provide individuals or organizations with the capacity for interactive communication as well as the exchange of content that is produced by an individual user. So, social media's arrival is transforming the dynamics of social interaction and information distribution. It differs from traditional media, which includes print media such as newspapers and journals, radio, or television, and it is different from traditional media in two crucial ways.

So let us see how social media is different from our traditional media such as newspaper, radio, television, journals, pamphlets and so forth. Firstly, the sheer quality of user created content far exceeds that originating from journalistic or expert sources. And secondly, its viral capacity for potentially exponential information spread through personal networks and platform integration, which significantly diminishes centralized control over the flow of information. So there are two aspects. The traditional media would produce news or information in a controlled manner and also disseminate it with a centralized control.

Social Media

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- (2) its "viral" capacity for potentially exponential **information spread through personal networks and platform integration**, which significantly diminishes centralized control over the flow of information.

It would not be spread or passed on indiscriminately. There would be some screening. There would be some censor. And there would be a central or centralized authority distinguishing correct from incorrect. So now we see that an individual who is on social media platform has much more agency in creating information.

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So, as a result, we have bulk of information being created, you know, every day, each moment by, you know, hundreds of thousands of users and this sieving mechanism, the sieving mechanism to separate the false information or fake news from the correct information becomes It's a little fragile. It's a little problematic to separate the two. So in a way, the recipient of any news on social media is vulnerable, is in a way exposed to fake news or information, especially if she is unaware, if she's uninitiated to the whole, you know, dynamics and process of social media. So social media enables greater agency for an individual, but social media also unleashes the possibility of fake news.

And because the news is unchecked, a lot of people fall. prey to unverified, baseless information, which may lead to fraudulence, hate-mongering, fear-mongering, and other detrimental consequences or effects. So, it spreads very fast. Thanks to the technology boom that we are experiencing today, news or information moves very fast. There is the concept of viral news, a viral video, or viral information movement.

or image, and it is later, you know, found out that many of these, you know, information or data are unverified; they are doctored videos. So they can be used for political purposes, for spreading, you know, social hatred, and so forth. So as users, we need to be really very careful while navigating social media platforms or while downloading any kind of journal paper or scholarly article from any website. We have to see the source.

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The same goes for online news. We have to look at the source. That's highly recommended. Now, through its interactive and collaborative nature, social media facilitates the development and endurance of online communities. Social media enables people from various strata of society, different parts of the globe, to come together and form a community—a virtual community on social media.

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These could be communities, you know, that are experts on a certain scholarly or academic topic. The exchange actually facilitates access to knowledge. So it could be a scholarly community. It could be a linguistic community, a community based on language, a community based on religion, or a community based on people who are coming from a particular country or a certain part of the world, you know.

Social Media and Tribes

- Through its interactive and collaborative nature, social media facilitates the development and endurance of online communities.

- These communities can be utilized to promote awareness of diverse issues and to gather user feedback on aspects, such as product preferences, service delivery, endorsements, policy creation, public image, and service evaluation.

- In this context, a lack of uniformity prevails in the socio-political and economic circumstances of tribal communities across India.

So some kind of commonality that people have identified with each other. There are different societies, and we subscribe to these societies, we become members of these societies, and hence we are part of one particular group on social media where we exchange information. Now, these social media communities can be utilized for promoting awareness of diverse issues as well as to gather user feedback on aspects such as product preferences, service delivery, endorsements, policy making, public image creation, and service evaluation. Think of any online service, delivery service such as Amazon or Flipkart. We buy a product by evaluating it, by looking at the reviews.

Similarly, I mean, everything has become a product now. Even a course such as the one I'm teaching right now is a product. People enroll for a course based on... the evaluation based on the feedback. So social media is actually very important in selling an image, creating an image, and creating ideology.

creating ideas and some readiness about things that exist around us. So how is this product? When we say product, in today's consumerist society, product also refers to an

academic course that a teacher is offering. A person is a product that a company is looking to hire. So how am I as, you know, as a product, as someone who fits into a job position?

So for that, I would need to put up my resume, my academic qualification and the qualities that I possess as a person. So it enables a social media promotes awareness. It enables forming an idea about something. And although we are navigating social media in individual capacity, we are actually associating with innumerable other people in terms of checking their feedback, in terms of helping others by putting up my own feedback. Be it about a book I have read, a film that I have watched, a restaurant that I have explored for the first time.

So it actually enables service evaluation. And if we are signing petition letters. In a more politicized context, if we are signing petition letters, resisting something or kind of pushing a cause, a social cause, such as in the context of the tribal studies, if we are trying to push some cause for a tribal community that is fast becoming extinct or that is endangered, Then we are also pushing some kind of policy formation, policy creation via social media. So social media can be a very powerful, very significant medium.

For creating impact on society, on different social organizations, on political decisions, on governmental decisions, and so forth. So, in this context, we have to understand that a lack of uniformity prevails in our general socio-political and economic circumstances as far as the tribal communities' access to and, you know, the usage of social media is concerned across India. How far and how much do the tribal communities explore social media? How many of them really have access to mobile phones, computers, and other such electronic devices that connect them to social media?

Forget about traditional media. Perhaps that has somewhat reached even the remote tribal areas, but the current social media platforms that can be accessed through electronic devices are in many cases unreachable for the tribal communities. So there is this asymmetrical access to information as well as to the creation of information. In contrast to the rest of the country, tribes in the northeastern part of India, however, demonstrate higher levels of literacy and digital connectivity. This divergence is largely owing to targeted government initiatives and the demographic significance of tribal populations in these particular northeastern states.

In this regard, scholar and critic Ishar Sharma observes that irrespective of demographic and socioeconomic distinctions, individuals living in the northeastern region are demonstrating a growing trend of connecting and communicating with one another through social media platforms. So, the usage of social media is incumbent on a number of factors, including literacy rate, the government policies that have impacted a particular society, and the general population's participation in social activities, their awareness about larger political happenings—all these things also determine how far social media has been able to penetrate a society and how far a society, in turn, is able to use social media to its best advantage. So, social media platforms serve as informational and empowering tools for the youth in the northeastern region of India, facilitating personal and community-level change. For the tribal youth professionals, these platforms offer significant avenues for marketing, networking, as well as identifying business opportunities.

Social Media and Tribes

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Further, we see that social media platforms function as a space where employers can connect with potential employees, and unemployed individuals can seek employment according to their qualifications, their needs, and what they have to offer. So, social media platforms have generated numerous employment opportunities for tribal communities and have opened up novel avenues for income generation. They also facilitate political transformations by providing social movements with an efficient and cost-effective means of disseminating and circulating information, as well as mobilizing individuals. They mobilize and make individuals aware of what is happening around them. And the good part of what I said—facilitating political transformation and circulating information—is that it is efficient and cost-effective.

Social Media and Tribes

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One important part of this whole process is that it is, A, efficient, and B, cost-effective. It's not a very costly affair. You know, putting up some kind of notice or information on social media is not a costly affair at all. It is not a costly affair at all. So even the less advantaged or less privileged marginal communities, such as tribal groups, can make use of social media.

In this way, they can grow in many ways—economically, in terms of social agency or bargaining power, and in terms of political demands and policymaking, among others. So, a significant recent shift involves the increasing convergence of audiences with users, as individuals actively contribute content to platforms established by media sources. In this regard, Nikhil Kumar Singh Maher finds that tribal communities are increasingly leveraging and accessing social media as a tool for empowerment across multiple dimensions, enabling and boosting their growth and development in different fields. Technological access now enables greater awareness of tribal rights and culture, fostering both self and collective identity formation. Now, despite educational limitations, the digital literacy facilitated by social media enables tribal youth to become key agents in demanding essential infrastructure, such as sanitary products.

So it becomes a platform for articulating one's demands. For example, demands for something as basic as clean drinking water, better housing facilities, schooling facilities, and so forth. Additionally, social media platforms serve as crucial resources for mobilizing collective concerns and action against unjust development, thereby amplifying the issues of displacement and rehabilitation. So social media also supports the cause of tribal people as a collective entity. And it also, you know,

expedites or catalyzes certain actions that they demand. It expedites certain reactions from the larger society. It could be the non-tribal society too. How they react to what is happening in different tribal regions. For example, the cause or the case of unjust development, amplifying issues of displacement and rehabilitation.

So, all this information is now, you know, being shared on social media by individuals. An individual feels more empowered in the presence of social media because they don't have to depend on one centralized, you know, source of information, formal media such

as newspapers or TV shows or TV news anymore. They can advertise their own qualities. They can look for jobs. They can talk about their own concerns or their own crises on social media and thereby reach out to a large audience, interact with

And sometimes, very curiously and intriguingly, social media takes up the job or the role of resolving larger issues with too many people, you know, communicating. On a certain platform where people don't even know each other, they tend to at least put in some effort to resolve larger issues, larger social or national issues on social media. It does have its interesting outcomes in very extreme ways. It could also be deemed as something undesirable and even something contributing to ill feelings and malice. So as far as the tribes are concerned, these platforms also provide a space to articulate health and nutrition disparities and hazards, exposing the lack of basic amenities and developmental exclusion.

Moreover, social media is instrumental in reclaiming and reinforcing tribal identity, thereby countering the erosion caused through interface with modern institutions and facilitating the preservation of languages and traditional knowledge. So through social media, tribal people from different parts of the country and by extension even from outside the country can connect, and it reinforces, enables them to reclaim their tribal identity and prevent erosion or any kind of dilution of their traditional, you know, practices and rituals. It enables them to discuss the different aspects that make up tribal identity, such as the preservation of their languages, knowledge, and practices. And, you know, teaching it to the next generation is a challenge that any community faces, and that can be met to an extent through creating a platform for active discussions.

Social Media and Tribes

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- Moreover, social media is instrumental in reclaiming and reinforcing tribal identity, countering the erosion caused through interface with modern institutions, facilitating the preservation of languages and traditional knowledge (Singhmar, 2023).

- According to K. M. Baiju (2024), tribal folk forms and knowledge are gaining popularity on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook, generating significant revenue for content creators.

on social media. So social media becomes instrumental; it plays a momentous role in holding the meaning, the identity, the significance of any community and passing it on to the youth, to the next generation. So that it becomes an enabler of traditional knowledge, languages, and traditional practices, meanings of rituals, and so forth. According to Kem Baiju, tribal folk forms and knowledge are gaining popularity on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, generating significant revenue for the content creators.

So, there are two things happening simultaneously. Knowledge is being disseminated for the tribals and even beyond the community. And the one who creates the knowledge, the user is making some income out of knowledge creation, out of knowledge generation. So that sounds like a very fair and healthy exchange actually. However, tribal communities, the originators of this content, including, you know, knowledge on traditional medicine, arts, language, songs, in many events receive hardly or no benefits.

Social Media and Tribes

- However, tribal communities, the originators of this content (including traditional medicine, arts, language, songs like 'Ellulleri Maninangere', etc.), receive no benefits due to the absence of adequate legal frameworks (copyright, patent, or specific tribal laws) to protect their traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights.

- This results in a situation where non-tribal producers profit immensely from tribal cultural heritage without sharing any compensation with the rightful owners.

This is because of the absence of adequate legal frameworks. So when we are talking about presence of certain legal frameworks and legalities that kind of control the usage of

social media or that control ownership on any knowledge creation, knowledge processing. Here we are referring to copyright, the issue of copyright, patent or specific tribal laws that would protect their traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights. That becomes very, very important point.

How to protect the traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights? In the absence of copyright or patent, the creator of knowledge, the processor of this knowledge, the disseminator of the knowledge can easily be engulfed by a more powerful, you know, source, a more powerful entity, right? So that way tribal communities are liable, they are susceptible to, you know, deception or to kind of unfair deal or unfair exchange. So this results in a situation where non-tribal producers profit immensely from tribal cultural heritage without sharing any compensation with the rightful owners who are the producer, who are the creator. of knowledge, of tribal knowledge.

So, to conclude our lecture, we see that social media offers Indian tribes valuable opportunities for self-representation, community building, and advocacy for their rights, demands, and culture. However, these benefits are accompanied by significant risks of cultural and economic exploitation, particularly concerning their traditional knowledge, which necessitates proactive legal and ethical considerations. So, while tribal knowledge should be shared on social media, there also needs to be a safeguarding mechanism—a way of channeling the benefits back to the creators of the knowledge, to those who are processing the knowledge.

The benefits should not be asymmetrically taken away by someone who does not belong to or is not part of the tribal knowledge system or the tribal ecosystem. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us continue with the topic of social media in our next lecture. Thank you.

Conclusion

- Social media offers Indian tribes valuable opportunities for self-representation, community building, and advocating for their rights and culture.

- However, these benefits are accompanied by significant risks of cultural and economic exploitation, particularly concerning their traditional knowledge, necessitating proactive legal and ethical considerations.